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DISCOVERY OF SOME NEW PETROGLYPHS NEAR CAICARA ON THE ORINOCO

IN the winter of 1908 and 1909, while surveying geographically and geologically the region about Caicara on the Orinoco, a region that was very little known up to that time, I discovered on the banks of the Orinoco, as well as in the forest that separates the river from the plains of the savana, some new petroglyphs. They apparently belong, not only geographically but also genetically, to the same large group of petroglyphs which is scattered over a wide area in Venezuela. This area is bounded by the Orinoco, the Atabapo, the Rio Negro, and the Cassiquiare. Whatever we know about the distribution of these petroglyphs, we owe in the main to men like Alexander von Humboldt, Robert and Richard Schomburgk, Koch-Gruenberg, Im Thurn, Charles Brown, J. Chaffanjon, Alfredo de Carvalho, and others.

Alexander von Humboldt mentions in his *Reise in die Aequatorial-Gegenden des neuen Continents* two petroglyphs from the region of Caicara, viz. "el sol" and "la luna," of which I, however, saw only one, "el sol," while I never succeeded in finding the other. Although Humboldt is the proper discoverer of "el sol," he never described this unique and most beautiful petroglyph. The figure is deeply carved in a comparatively hard granite rock that rises about four feet above the ground and is entirely hidden from view by dense undergrowth. It is quite a complicated figure, so far as its design is concerned. So far as I am aware, "el sol" and "la luna" were the only two petroglyphs which were known to archaeologists and ethnologists as being from this specific region, at the time that I arrived in Venezuela. The other petroglyphs which I found have never been mentioned nor described either by

Humboldt or by any other traveller who touched that point, and apparently were not known to any one of them.

We may distinguish between three more or less distinct types of these new petroglyphs, so far as degree of workmanship as well as other points of view are concerned. There is one type that apparently represents one of the initial stages of this early art of petroglyphy; there is another type that shows this art in a more advanced stage, and there is a third type that evidently represents the most advanced stage in the development, as these figures are the most complicated and required



FIGURE 1. — PETROGLYPH, FIRST TYPE.

the greatest skill to execute them. While the figures belonging to the first two types were found near the bank of the Orinoco on the Caicara side, or directly on the bank in the gneiss rocks that are exposed there, the figures of the last type were met with farther away from the river, in the dense river forest, as has been mentioned before. It must, however, not be understood that the various figures belonging to each type occur more or less closely together, for this is not the case. They are, on the contrary, widely scattered along the bank and through the forest.

The first type (Figs. 1, 2) comprises designs of the simplest kind, although they may not be as simple as others of which I have seen reproductions. These fairly geometrical circles, one

in the other, the centre of the innermost one being hollowed out, are from two to four feet in diameter, while the grooves are from two to one and a half inches wide and comparatively shallow. This shallowness, however, is, in my opinion, rather

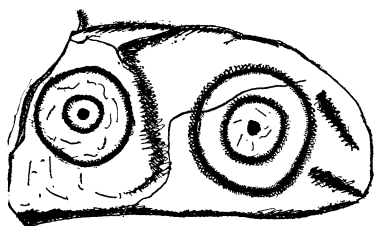


FIGURE 2.—PETROGLYPH, FIRST TYPE.

due to weathering which must have continued for a long time, and I therefore believe that these grooves were originally considerably deeper than they are now. If we knew their original depth or if we could form an idea as to what this depth may have been, and if we could ascertain the approximate rate of weathering of the granite and gneiss rocks in that climate, we should be able to arrive at an approximate estimate of the time that must have elapsed since these petroglyphs were produced.

Of the second type I found only one figure. I could not secure a photograph of it, as I did not happen to have my camera along when I discovered it. The reproduction in the text (Fig. 3) is from a copy in my field book. It is somewhat more complicated than the figures of the first type. It is nearly four feet long and three feet wide, and while the grooves are of about the same width as those of the circles, they seem to be somewhat deeper.

To the third type belongs one that was known, when I came to Caicara, viz. "el sol," and one that was not known, "el tigre" (Fig. 4). The latter is, next to "el sol," the most complicated and most elaborate figure in the neighborhood of Caicara. Its true dimensions may readily be estimated from the size of the two boys, typical Venezuelan boys, who assisted me in botanizing and other collecting. The grooves in this petroglyph are somewhat narrower and at the same time somewhat more distinct than those in the figures of the two other types. Nevertheless, they were also so much worn that they had to be chalked with some near-by "laterite" clay in order to bring them out better for the camera.



FIGURE 3.—PETROGLYPH, SECOND TYPE.

So far as the origin of these new petroglyphs as well as the origin of the already known stone-carvings is concerned, which belong to that large geographic and genetic group of petroglyphs alluded to in the beginning of this paper, we learn that the Indian tribes of to-day which inhabit those regions have no answer to the question : Who made those unique and mysterious figures? No message concerning these carvings has come to them through tradition. Was it a people like that of the Incas, strong and mighty, of comparatively high culture and advanced thought? Whence came it and by what catastrophe was it swept

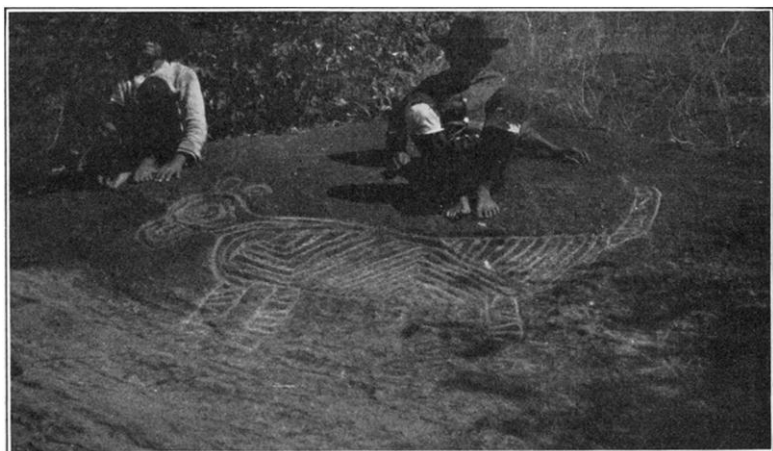


FIGURE 4.—PETROGLYPH, THIRD TYPE, "EL TIGRE."

from the face of the earth? We do not know. At any rate, however, we may be safe to say, that the people which produced those petroglyphs must have been further advanced in certain respects than the tribes that occupied these regions after them. For among none of the Indian tribes now living in Venezuela do we find this art developed and cultivated. It is a thing of the past.

There are certain similarities between these petroglyphs and some others found in Africa, and more especially in Nubia and Abyssinia, and there are resemblances between the Venezuelan stone carvings and others that have been discovered in the northern part of Asia, but it would be too bold an undertaking to advance on the basis of these mere resemblances any

theories as to the possible or probable movements of that prehistoric people that once inhabited the primeval forests of Venezuela and the banks of the Orinoco. These resemblances might just as well be interpreted as a case of parallel, independent development of this early art of petroglyphy under similar conditions.

A natural question is : What do these carvings mean ? While some authorities, among them Humboldt, consider them merely as records of pastime and leisure, of the cultivating of this art of stone carving, others are inclined to ascribe to them a deeper meaning and to regard them as symbols of a religious nature and objects of worship, while there are still others who hold the view that at least some of these stone carvings may represent records of an historic character.

So far as my own view with regard to the real significance of the petroglyphs of Venezuela in general and the newly discovered petroglyphs especially is concerned, a view that is based on extensive studies in fetichism, I venture to say that those of the two more simple types seem to be records of fetichism in the earlier stages of its development; while the third type of petroglyphs, including "el sol" and "el tigre," may be interpreted as recording the attempts at rude sculpturing of images of well-known objects of nature, like the sun and the jaguar, I am inclined to regard these carvings also as records of fetichism, and more especially of later fetichism, when the practice was developed of placing images of certain undesirable elements at certain spots in order to scare them away and ward them off. Thus the jaguar always has been, as it is now, to the Indian tribes of these regions, a most undesirable element, a terror, and in my opinion the carving of the image of the jaguar in the hard rock was meant to create a fetich that might scare away that most dreaded enemy. So it is with the sun. The sun is for the Venezuelan Indian a most undesirable element, especially in the dry season, when, on account of the increasing dryness, his game on which he has to rely for his subsistence becomes scarce. Thus the image of the sun, carved in the solid rock in the dense shady forest, might have served a similar purpose; namely, that of a fetich to shorten the dry season or to at least facilitate occasional showers.

Only he who has actually travelled in those regions during the dry season, that practically lasts half a year, and only he who has actually experienced its grewsome hardships, will be able to conceive fully the significance of this latter interpretation. At the same time there is no doubt that these last-mentioned petroglyphs indirectly served as a means to develop and to cultivate the art of sculpture in its initial stages.

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